Quality in Validation of Non-Formal and Informal Learning
- prerequisites for a high market value validation process
Anni Karttunen, Expert in European Educational Policy
Content:

Intro and background........................................................................................................3

How to define the term “quality in VNIL”?.................................................................3

Eight quality factors in validation of non-formal and informal learning...........5

1. Information................................................................................................................5

2. Preconditions..............................................................................................................6

3. Documentation – administrative procedures .......................................................7

4. Co-ordination............................................................................................................8

5. Guidance...................................................................................................................8

6. Mapping – Making the individual’s competences visible .....................................9

7. Assessment...............................................................................................................9

8. Follow-up .................................................................................................................10

Food for Thought .......................................................................................................10
Intro and background

A decade ago many educational institutions and especially higher education institutions (HEIs) were strongly of the opinion that validation of non-formal and informal learning (VNIL) is not an option for them. VNIL was considered labour and cost intensive, time consuming and there was an intrinsic fear that VNIL will undermine the quality and validity of qualifications gained in education. The fear stemmed from the notion of not being able to control the learning process as experiential learning often times is much wider in scope than e.g. learning gained by reading a particular book or attending lectures. Assessing experiential learning requires more extensive assessment methods to verify the appropriate level of learning than traditional, school based learning. Also, claims were made that individuals with experience still lacked the theoretical framework, which often times was considered more important than the ability to apply experiential learning in practice. As the HEIs have relative autonomy it was relatively easy to hide behind the fortress of tradition and status at first.

The Bologna process and the Copenhagen process made a significant change in the ways HEIs and vocational education and training (VET) organizations perceived VNIL. Also, much of the EU and national funding was directed towards developing VNIL procedures. It became evident to the world of education that VNIL is something to be seriously looked at. There was international and political pressure, pressure from working life, more and more competition of the number of students. This led the educational institutions to ask themselves, whether VNIL could provide them the edge to be more appealing both in the eyes of working life, public funding mechanisms and the potential students.

The process of developing a fully working, high-quality VNIL process takes time and requires investments in terms of competence development of staff, administrative procedures, developing learning outcome based curricula, attitude change of staff, coordination of validation, legislation supporting and steering validation, sustainable structures in terms of stakeholders and financing, etc. The first baby steps have been taken, yet many an institution still hesitates going forward with full throttle.

How to define the term “quality in VNIL”?

Joy Van Kleef (2010) defined the term quality in validation of non-formal and informal learning in the following way: it “refers to the establishment of and adherence to policies, processes and assessment practices that maximize individuals’ opportunities to fully and
accurately demonstrate relevant knowledge, skills and competencies. This definition is simple but not simplistic. It embeds important principles of accessibility, transparency, accountability, and validity. It implies that standards of knowledge, skills, and competencies will be used but it allows for the negotiation of what will be considered relevant. This definition focuses on the individual as the most important stakeholder. In this definition it is very notable that the individual is placed in the center of the process. Often times, when looking at descriptions of the validation procedure of an organization or a training system, the individual is missing from the picture. Validation procedures are in most instances constructed in a way that the individual has to seek for validation. In case the validation procedure is organization centered, it easily comes very bureaucratic and rather hinders than promotes making the individual’s competences visible. If the procedure is unclear, bureaucratic and requires more effort of the individual than the school based learning, validation will not gain popularity. People will vote with their feet.

In 2013 a Nordic group of experts compiled and published a Nordic Quality Model for Validation. This tool is comprised of eight quality factors in validation, each step with quality indicators and the individual in the center of the procedure. In the following the eight steps are described and explained.


Eight quality factors in validation of non-formal and informal learning

1. Information

Information is a key to the development of a validation system or a procedure. The information flow has to have many directions and the forms of information have to be modified according to the target group. Main target groups are the individuals (i.e. the candidates for validation), the training staff and the stakeholders.

Information has to be clear and unambiguous. Information -phase should address questions such as why, how, for whom and where and when. All target groups should have equal understanding of the procedure and the standards against which the competences are reflected. Information should also be accessible through various media, like the internet, intranet and brochures. Provision of information should be active and structured. It has become evident that in many organizations lack of information is a major reason for not taking up validation. If the staff does not know, the students do not know. If the students do not know, they will not seek to get their competences validated. If the stakeholders do not know, there will be lack of co-operation and lack of confidence in the system.
2. Preconditions

Preconditions refer to the regulatory framework for validation in each system. This paradigm is twofold: Firstly, there is the question whether the regulatory framework recognizes and supports validation of non-formal and informal learning (which can be seen as a precondition to the development and sustainability of a validation system). In many countries there is no regulatory framework for VNIL, which often means that the developed validation procedures and the results of validation do not gain high market value among stakeholders. The sustainability of the developed procedures also remains weak.

Secondly, even if a regulatory framework exists, there remains the question of interpretation and following the regulations by the practitioners. This question is also linked to the importance of information: regulations should be clear, unambiguous and they should be known by all relevant stakeholders.

Preconditions not only refer to laws and regulations, but also to funding mechanisms, co-operation structures between stakeholders as well as descriptions of qualification requirements, assessment criteria and standards (learning outcomes) as well as attitudes and the general outlook on VNIL among the practitioners.

Funding mechanisms promote sustainability of the system and the funding mechanisms of VNIL procedures should correlate to the existing funding mechanisms for education, i.e. VNIL should be available for individuals as any form of education (if VNIL is embedded in the education system).

Tight and open co-operation between stakeholders promotes trust and market value of VNIL. In systems where the stakeholders, like working life, are involved in the VNIL development and procedures, the results of VNIL are readily accepted and equal the status of the learning outcomes gained in education.

Many education systems where VNIL has been in place for a longer time stress the importance of describing the qualification requirements, the standards / assessment criteria in terms of learning outcomes. In case the qualification requirements are only described in terms of time (credits) and subject titles, the interpretation of the level of learning is near impossible and the result of the assessment is hardly valid. If the qualification requirement states that the student must learn 10 credits of IT skills including word processing, spread sheets, presentation tools and social media applications, BUT it does not indicate what the learning outcomes should be, assessment can get really wild.
Should the individual know how to make a plain power point presentation or should s/he know how to apply macros, media clips and graphs as well?

One very important, yet slightly neglected prerequisite is the attitude. In case the attitudes of the practitioners and/or stakeholders are negative, the VNIL is not very likely to yield best results. This precondition is also linked with information. Laws and regulations alone cannot change the attitudes, but there needs to be a lot of structured information, dialogue between stakeholders, peer learning and benchmarking activities.

3. Documentation – administrative procedures

Proper documentation system of the VNIL procedures with each individual promotes transparency, supports the individual rights and enhances a systemic approach to VNIL procedures. VNIL documentation could be compared with organic farming: the entire production trail has to be able to be tracked and traced down. A VNIL provider has to see that there is a proper documentation system and procedure in place and that each step of the validation process is duly documented (including guidance discussions, agreements, progress plans and timeframes, not to mention the assessment results and certification). Documentation should be clear and unambiguous and the administrative procedures should be evaluated regularly.

Establishing systematic compilation of statistics is very useful in terms of following the progress of VNIL. The number of people going through VNIL and the number of validated credits are a clear indicator whether the system is working or not. As said earlier on, people do vote with their feet.

The documentation also refers to the content of the qualification and the qualification requirements. In order for the VNIL procedures (and any education) to attain high market value the qualification requirements must meet the needs of working life. The marketplace is in a constant upheaval and the job related requirements change rapidly. Qualifications must meet with this challenge and move rapidly along with working life by regular evaluations and revisions to the qualification requirements.
4. Co-ordination

Co-ordination is a key element when establishing and developing a VNIL system. Proper co-ordination is backed up by the management and the definition of roles within the VNIL procedure should be clear. It would be useful to have a VNIL coordinator in the organization, whose role is to monitor the procedures, train/help practitioners, guide professionals, co-ordinate the development of procedures, help in forming communities of practice and networks of VNIL professionals.

From the viewpoint of the individual, there should be one entry point for validation. Smooth co-ordination makes the VNIL procedure transparent and customer friendly. Co-ordination ensures that the rights of the individual are respected and that the individuals get equal treatment and gain equal access.

5. Guidance

The purpose of guidance is to make sure that the glass is always half full and not half empty. The role of guidance in VNIL procedures is paramount for the benefit of the individual. Guidance should be an ongoing process throughout the VNIL process from the beginning to the end.

The key task of the guidance procedure is to make the individual’s competences visible, so that they can be assessed. Often individuals have a myriad of competences that they do not realize that they possess. It is the job of the guidance to provide the individual with tools to "dig out" their competences and make them visible.

Guidance provides the VNIL scene for the individual: What are the benefits of VNIL for the individual? How does the VNIL work? What are the rights and responsibilities of the individual? What are the assessment criteria like? How does the administrative documentation work? What kind of certification is available? What other possible outcomes there are for the individual? How to use the validation results? What type of further learning paths are available?

The guidance counselors should be trained in VNIL procedures. They should have a positive attitude towards VNIL and they should be impartial, good listeners, yet realistic. They should have excellent communication skills and they should have a relatively wide understanding of the existing qualifications and the qualification requirements. In many existing validation systems the counselor is considered the lifeline of the individual.
6. Mapping – Making the individual’s competences visible

In most EU documents the mapping is referred to as documentation. Mapping here refers to the process of making the individual’s competences visible in a reliable way. The individual is responsible for the mapping process. Only the individual him/herself can be aware of the competence s/he possesses. However, the procedure must be clear as to e.g. what is considered valid evidence and what counts as valid documentation.

A successful and thorough mapping (documentation) makes it easier to determine what is the most suitable qualification for the candidate, what level and width of competences does the individual have in order to plan a development path. In some cases the individual may have enough competences to cover only a part qualification or some modules, in some cases the level of competences is not high enough for a certain qualification, but further practice is needed to some extent. In other cases the individual can take the whole qualification via VNIL. The mapping is building the roadmap for the future.

There should be many different kinds of methods for mapping and documenting the individual’s competences. Here it is not only referred to official documentation such as prior certificates or employment references, but also pictures, portfolios or in some cases even oral descriptions of competences.

7. Assessment

The assessment result in VNIL should have a legal status (formal certification). The certification should carry the same status as certification gained in school based education in terms of employment or further education. The assessment procedure should be reliable, of high quality and the assessors should be competent both in VNIL procedures and assessment methodology as well as the field that they are assessing.

To ensure a high quality assessment procedure, there should be a number of assessment methods available and a combination of methods should be used depending on the needs of the individual and the qualification in question. The assessment criteria should be unambiguous and clear so that the individual can make a connection between real life experience and the assessment criteria. On the other hand the assessors need to have clear understanding of the interpretation of the assessment criteria.
To guarantee the rights of the individual, it would be beneficial to have more than one assessor and for best result there should be external assessors, who are independent of the organization or the individual. The assessment criteria and the procedure have to be transparent for all parties involved and the individual has the right for further advice in case there is any confusion. The purpose of the assessment is to measure the individual’s existing competences and not if the individual understands obscure language.

In order to maintain a high quality assessment procedure, the assessors need to have continuous training and the assessment methods and procedures must be regularly evaluated. Also the assessors must have a positive attitude towards validation and they should remember that the assessment procedure is also an important learning experience in the spirit of Life Long Learning.

8. Follow-up

After the assessment procedure, the individual has a right to have feedback of the assessment results and the possible consequences: Does the result of the assessment possibly shorten the study time? What are the future options in terms of education and work? What if the result of the assessment was negative and the individual does not agree with the result? Is there an appeals procedure in place? Is there guidance available also after the assessment procedure?

If a VNIL provider can answer “yes” to all of the questions above, one is on a quality path to validation!

Food for Thought

These eight factors do not aim to be exhaustive and they should not be used as a tick list only. Developing high quality in VNIL procedures is always related to the national system, to the regional needs and ways of co-operating as well as the education system. The eight factors are there to provide structure for discussion and development. Organizations / systems may delete or add points that are of importance to them and their system.

Quality and high market value are a result of networking, dialogue and team work. Trust is the key word. If there is not trust, there is no respect or market value. That is the basis for building a high-quality validation system!